

## **“Creed: I Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins”**

Date: July 29, 2018

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Creed, series

Theme: Forgiveness

Texts: Matthew 18:21-35; 1 John 1:5-10

One evening the fox invited his friend the stork to dinner. For a joke the fox prepared soup and served it in a shallow dish. The fox could easily lap up the soup. But the stork, with its long bill, went hungry. The fox gave the stork a sly grin and said, “I am sorry. It seems as if the soup is not to your liking.”

“There is no need to apologize,” the stork replied. “I would like to repay your hospitality and invite you to dinner tomorrow night.” The next evening the stork served the fox a meal in a long-necked jar with a narrow mouth. The stork could easily reach into the jar and eat, but the fox could not and went hungry.

“I will not apologize for the dinner,” the stork said, “because one bad turn deserves another.” After that, the fox and the stork were no longer friends. The moral of the story: Revenge may be sweet, but the damage it does cannot be repaired.

Forgiveness is at the heart and core of Christianity. Jesus came to forgive sinners. And, Jesus calls us to forgive others as we have been forgiven. We come now to the line in the Apostles’ Creed that says “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.”

Notice that the Creed doesn’t say “I believe that human beings are sinners,” though that is assumed. The emphasis in both the Creed and the Christian faith is not on guilt, but grace; it is not on sin, but forgiveness.

Of course, our affirmation of the forgiveness of sins doesn’t mean much if we don’t understand that we need forgiveness. Forgiveness is an

answer to a problem, a spiritual cure for a spiritual illness. And if you don't understand that you have a problem, you won't understand the solution when it's presented to you.

Belief in the forgiveness of sins is only good news if we first understand that we need forgiveness, and to make sense of that understanding we must talk about sin. The word that is used most often in the New Testament is the Greek word *hamartia*, which means "to miss the mark." If an archer aims at a target, pulls back the bow and lets the arrow fly, he or she may get a bulls eye, hit the outer rim, or miss the target altogether.

It's a helpful image. We as human beings miss the target with our thoughts, words and deeds. Daily we miss the mark, by saying, thinking or doing things we should not have done, or failing to say, think or do things we should have done. And when we do, we find ourselves in need of forgiveness.

One helpful way to identify sins is to look at the traditional list of seven deadly sins, from which all other sins arise: pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony and lust. Or, we can look at the fruit of the spirit as the target that we're aiming for, and we can ask, have I hit or missed the target when it comes to love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control?

The truth is we all fall short, we all miss the mark; we all are in need of forgiveness. We've all treated others poorly at times, been self-absorbed, and failed to do justice and practice loving kindness. We're all difficult to live with at times. We've all missed the mark.

One of the biggest mistakes that people make is to deny there is any sin in them. We pretend sin has no power over us and that we're not really

sinner. Maintaining this illusion shows a lack of self-awareness. And self-awareness is the very thing we need in order to turn away from sin and resist its power.

So long as I remain unaware of my own tendency to be self-absorbed, materialistic, lustful, boastful, unloving, stingy and more – I'll find it easier to NOT surrender them, but I'll even try to justify them. If, on the other hand, I'm aware of my own sin and the impulses within me to do the very things I know are wrong, and to fail to do the very things I know are right, then the better I am to be able to struggle against sin and live according to God's ways. Awareness of our sin is critical to forgiveness.

Who needs forgiveness? Human beings need forgiveness. We all do, because we're all sinners. But will God forgive you of all your sins? Some people deny they have any sin and don't think they need to be forgiven. But on the other end of the spectrum are people who are uncertain that God can or will forgive them. They live in a perpetual state of guilt.

This is not what God intends for anyone. There is no sin that God is not willing and able to forgive. Having some degree of guilt is not a bad thing. We're meant to feel remorse when we've done something wrong. These feelings of guilt move us to repentance, reconciliation and to avoid doing the same behavior in the future. Right?

But for some people, they deal with excessive guilt; and it's often their perception of God that is inadequate. They feel guilty when they're enjoying life, like they're not supposed to, that God doesn't want them to enjoy life. For them, God is this righteous judge who is just waiting for them to make a mistake. They often feel that no matter what they do, they're wrong.

But Jesus came to reveal God's character and will, revealing by his life and his death that God is interested in forgiving people, offering grace.

Throughout the Gospels Jesus told parables about God's willingness to forgive sins. Jesus was known by his critics as "a friend of sinners." Large crowds of people who felt alienated from God came to hear him. He was constantly offering forgiveness to people who clearly needed to know that their lives could be made new.

The Lord's Supper reminds us of why he came. "Take and eat, this is my body. Drink from this all of you, this is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for you and for many so that their sins may be forgiven." As he hung on the cross, he forgave the people who had nailed him there. Jesus revealed a God who is more willing to forgive than we are to ask. Amen? Amen!

When we say in the Creed, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins," we are affirming the truth of Scripture that God is willing to forgive us. God wants to release us from our burdens. God's desire is that we repent and turn away from the sins we've committed and the burdens of sin and guilt that weigh us down.

You don't have to be defined by the worst things you've ever done. And you don't have to be tomorrow who you were yesterday. God wants to forgive you. God is the God of multiple second chances. Jesus suffered and died to redeem you.

Ours is a gospel of redemption. God offers to each and every one of us new life in exchange for the old, grace and redemption for our guilt and shame. And we can, and likely must, claim this every day. To ask forgiveness is not something that we do once and we're done. Because we're human, we often miss the mark, and we need to confess our sins every day. But God is faithful and just, and promises to forgive those sins. So, every day can be a fresh new start.

But that is not the end of the story. When we say that we believe in the forgiveness of sins, we're not only confessing that we are sinners, nor that God is willing to forgive us; we are also expressing that we are called to forgive the sins of others.

Jesus teaches this over and over again in the Gospels. In the Lord's Prayer we say, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." In the Gospel lesson, Peter wants to know how many times he has to forgive someone who has wronged him. Peter gets that it's not just a one-time opportunity. He suggests seven times, and probably felt pretty proud for being so generous in his willingness to forgive.

Jesus tells him, not seven times, but seventy times seven. And Jesus didn't mean to be taken literally. He was suggesting that forgiveness needs to be offered as many times as it's needed. Because forgiveness is what restores the relationship between two persons. We don't keep a record of wrongs. We want to make the relationship right again, so we forgive.

Our unwillingness to forgive creates in our hearts a thing called resentment. Holding on to resentment is like drinking poison and hoping the other person gets sick. Forgiving the other person is not just for their sake; it's for ours as well. When we hold on to resentments, it just makes us feel sick inside.

Now, forgiveness doesn't mean that you let someone continue to abuse you; it is perfectly acceptable to establish boundaries. Forgiveness also doesn't mean that the one who sinned is absolved from all consequences. Sometimes consequences are themselves redemptive. Consequences may be legally required, and the failure to have consequences may keep the person from changing.

Likewise, forgiving is not the same as forgetting, at least not for us human beings. I can forgive someone who has wronged me. But I'll also remember what that person did and I'll probably be a little more cautious around them.

There is so much more that I could say about forgiveness, but let's end here. When we confess that we believe in the forgiveness of sins, we are recognizing that all of us need forgiveness. We are affirming that God is willing to forgive our sins. And we are also accepting Christ's call to forgive others.

I believe in the forgiveness of sins. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Creed: What Christians Believe and Why*, by Adam Hamilton, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016, pp. 129 – 144.